Stokes says no coasting in 'huge' final Ashes clash

SYDNEY: Captain Ben Stokes on Saturday called the fifth and final Test against Australia a "huge game" for England and vowed there would be no coasting at the end of a long and draining Ashes tour.

The tourists go into the clash on Sunday at the Sydney Cricket Ground buoyed by a four-wicket win inside two days at the previous Test in Melbourne.

It snapped a 15-year winless streak in Australia but came too late to save the series with the hosts retaining the urn by winning in Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide.

Stokes said it was important to keep the momentum going.

"This is a big game, purely because we're walking out there representing England," he said.

"The Ashes, unfortunately for us, hasn't gone the way we wanted it to, but we've got one more game in a big series.

"And it's a real big one for us. So although we can't get the thing that we came here for, we've still got a chance to go there and win a game of cricket."

Stokes, whose side has been hounded by the media in Australia and come under enormous pressure back home, added that there was no room for complacency and it had been made clear to the players.

"I don't think it will happen, just sort of coasting through this game and seeing what happens," he said. "This is a huge game for us... it's going to take all 11 of us to go out there and get on the right side of the result like we managed to do last week.

"So although we get to go home on eight or nine days' time, any thought of that can wait till then. It's about what we do over the next five days, that's the most important thing."

England named a 12-man squad on Friday with seamer Matthew Potts and spinner Shoaib Bashir included.

Potts is the only unused fast bowler from their original 16-man squad and is set to play after Gus Atkinson limped off with a hamstring issue in Melbourne.

Bashir and Will Jacks are expected to vie for the final spot.

Australia captain Steve Smith on Saturday said a final look at the wicket was needed before the hosts decided on their starting XI.

Stokes said England also needed more time, but admitted no one really knew how the wicket would play despite captains and coaches pretending they did.

"I mean, we try and act like we know what we're doing when we're looking down at the pitch and rubbing it and knocking it -- no one really has a clue to be honest," he said.

"You can only just try and give yourself the best chance of thinking: right, what 11 do we need to give us a chance of winning this?

Smith said he had no end date to call time on his career. With the retirement of Usman Khawaja after the Test and Nathan Lyon out injured, Smith will be the oldest player in the Australian line-up alongside Scott Boland.

Asked if he would still be playing at the next Ashes in England in 2027, the 36-year-old was non-committal, but said he was enjoying his cricket.

"I've said it for a while, I'm taking it day-by-day, series-by-series, and we'll see where things land," said Smith, who has played 122 Tests and scored more than 10,000 runs.

"I feel like I'm doing alright at the moment, I'm enjoying it, I'm contributing, and having fun. So there's no real end date for me.

"I think with obviously Usman dropping off, he's one of our experienced players, so it probably wouldn't be ideal if him and I went out this week, for instance," he added. "So no, I want to keep playing."

Khawaja, 39, announced his retirement on Friday, culminating a career where it began after making his debut at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 2011, also against England.

Smith paid tribute to his long-time teammate, but refused to be drawn on the Pakistan-born player's claims of "racial stereotyping" during his career.

"I'm not going into the mind of Usman Khawaja," he said.

Khawaja claimed the way he was treated by media and former players after he played golf before the first Test in Perth and could not bat because of back spasms amounted to "the same racial stereotypes" he had always dealt with.

"I think he's always prepared the same way, he's worked hard and I think some of the stuff around him getting injured when he played golf the day before the game, that was unfair," said Smith. "He's done that for 15 years and had a pretty good career."—AFP

Kolkata release Bangladesh's Mustafizur on BCCI instruction

NEW DELHI: Kolkata Knight Riders have released fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman of Bangladesh after being told to do so by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the Indian Premier League (IPL) team said on Saturday amid growing tensions between the countries.

Last month, hundreds protested near Bangladesh's High Commission in New Delhi after Hindu factory worker Dipu Chandra Das was beaten and set on fire in Bangladesh's Mymensingh district by a crowd that accused him of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

A total of 12 people were arrested in connection with his death.

The incident worsened relations between India and its neighbour, with ties already strained after Bangladesh's former prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled to New Delhi following protests against her in 2024. Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.

"Due to recent developments going on all across, the BCCI has instructed the franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release one of their players, Mustafizur Rahman of Bangladesh, from their squad," BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia told Indian news agency ANI.

"They can ask for a replacement if needed. And upon request, the BCCI will allow a replacement player."

Mustafizur, 30, has played for Sunrisers Hyderabad, Mumbai Indians, Rajasthan Royals, Chennai Super Kings and Delhi Capitals in previous seasons of the IPL, taking 65 wickets in 60 matches.

He was signed by Kolkata in last month's auction for a fee of 92 million Indian rupees ($1.02 million), making him the most expensive player from Bangladesh in IPL history.

Later on Saturday, Kolkata confirmed Mustafizur had been released.

"The BCCI will allow Kolkata Knight Riders a replacement player in line with IPL regulations, and further details will be communicated in due course," the team added in a statement.

Reuters has approached Mustafizur for comment.

The 19th edition of the IPL begins on March 26, after India and Sri Lanka co-host the Twenty20 World Cup starting in February.—Agencies

Gill to lead India in New Zealand ODIs

NEW DELHI: Shubman Gill will be back as India's captain in this month's three One-day Internationals against New Zealand, while batsman Shreyas Iyer is expected to return from a two-month injury layoff subject to a fitness clearance, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) said on Saturday.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya and fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah have not been named in the 15-man squad for the 50-over matches at home. The ODI series begins in Vadodara on Jan 11 before games in Rajkot (Jan 14) and Indore (Jan 18).

Gill, who injured his foot in training last month, has been excluded from India's squad for the T20 World Cup on home soil. He is expected to play in domestic cricket next week before resuming his duties as India's 50-over captain.

Iyer will be available provided BCCI's Centre of Excellence (CoE) declares him fit to play. He has been undergoing rehabilitation after suffering a spleen injury in October, the BCCI said in a statement.

"Hardik Pandya has not been cleared by the BCCI's CoE to bowl 10 overs in a match, and considering the ICC Men's T20 World Cup to follow, his workload is being managed," the statement added.

India will play five T20 Internationals against New Zealand later this month, before starting their T20 World Cup campaign with a group fixture against the US on Feb 7.

Squad: Shubman Gill (captain), Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, KL Rahul, Shreyas Iyer, Washington Sundar, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Siraj, Harshit Rana, Prasidh Krishna, Kuldeep Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Arshdeep Singh, Yashasvi Jaiswal.—Reuters

BIRMINGHAM: Aston Villa's John McGinn (second R) watches his shot beat Nottingham Forest goalkeeper John Victor during their Premier League match at Villa Park on Saturday.—AFP

Villa rebound from Arsenal loss as West Ham collapse against Wolves

LONDON: Aston Villa bounced back from a chastening defeat at Arsenal to beat Nottingham Forest 3-1 on Saturday and climb to second in the Premier League as West Ham collapsed against basement club Wolves.

Unai Emery's Villa are now just three points behind the table-topping Gunners, who were in action at Bournemouth later in the day.

Villa's 11-game winning streak in all competitions was brought to a shuddering halt with a 4-1 defeat at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday, raising doubts about their ability to maintain a title charge.

But their impressive record at Villa Park remains intact — they have now won 11 straight matches there since a 3-0 defeat to Crystal Palace in August.

England forward Ollie Watkins gave Villa a deserved lead on the cusp of half-time with a powerful strike from just outside the area.

John McGinn doubled the home side's lead early in the second period before Morgan Gibbs-White gave Forest hope of an unlikely point.

But Scotland midfielder McGinn scored his second goal of the game from distance after a brain freeze from Forest goalkeeper John Victor, who inexplicably charged out of his area.

McGinn collected Youri Tielemans' long ball and remained cool, sidestepping the 'keeper and stroking the ball into the empty net.

The win takes Villa to 42 points, three behind leaders Arsenal, and one ahead of Manchester City, who host managerless Chelsea on Sunday. Villa boss Emery told Sky Sports that his players and coaching staff had held a meeting after their drubbing at the Emirates.

"I am so happy," he said. "We had to recover our energy and our confidence. Here, at Villa Park, the energy we create was really important.

"Forest are competitive. After the Arsenal match we met. The players and staff, how we are doing this season, how we are feeling, how we needed to keep the same consistency as before. How we needed to be together and strong."

Forest, who have now suffered four straight league defeats, remain one place above the relegation zone, four points clear of West Ham, who slumped to a damaging 3-0 loss at Molineux.

Sean Dyche, brought in to replace the sacked Ange Postecoglou in October, said he knew his task would be difficult when he arrived at the club.

"The mentality is there but you can't keep giving yourself a mountain to climb," he told the BBC.

"Players were switching off to the basics. We have worked on it and shown them but this is the job. I never expected it to be easy when I got here."

West Ham, winless since early November, travelled to face Wolves in desperate need of a win against a team that had mustered just three points by the midway point of the season.

Jhon Arias gave the home team an early lead and Hwang Hee-chan doubled their advantage from the penalty spot shortly after the half-hour mark.

Teenager Mateus Mane drilled in his first Premier League goal shortly before half-time, all but guaranteeing Rob Edwards' team a first win of the season.

It is a disastrous result for Nuno Espirito Santo's men, who are in danger of being cut adrift at the bottom of the Premier League along with Wolves and Burnley.

But the result gives a glimmer of hope for Wolves, who appeared to be on course for the worst season in Premier League history.

Elsewhere on Saturday, Brighton beat Burnley 2-0, courtesy of goals from Georginio Rutter and Yasin Ayari.—AFP

Bike rookie Canet enjoys dream Dakar start

YANBU: Spaniard Edgar Canet made a dream Dakar Rally debut on Saturday when the 20-year-old rookie topped the times in the prologue of motorsport's most gruelling event in Saudi Arabia.

The KTM factory rider ended the 22km ride around Yanbu three seconds clear of teammate and defending champion Daniel Sanders with Honda's American rider Ricky Brabec, the 2024 winner, five seconds adrift.

"I was super fast and super happy with this feeling. It's the best way to start the rally," said Canet.

Sanders was relieved to get his title defence up and running.

"Happy to be here at the start line and get the prologue done. It was a lot faster than expected, but not so technical, so it was hard to make up time," the Australian said.

"It was full gas the whole time, so I'm sure there were really close times.

It's good to get that out of the way and get into a stage tomorrow."

Swede Mattias Ekstrom took the first day honours in the car category by eight seconds from American Mitch Guthrie, both driving for Ford Raptor.

Multiple winner Nasser al-Attiyah of Qatar did the best of the big names, crossing eight seconds adrift in fourth.

Defending champion Yazeed al-Rajhi of Saudi Arabia was 14sec off the pace.

After taking his tally of Dakar stage wins to six, Ekstrom said: "I had a very good prologue, it was much more difficult than I expected from navigation and stones and, for me, this was a small stage and we did a very good job."

Sunday's first stage, also around Yanbu, is a 305km mix of rocky and sandy terrain.—AFP

YANBU: Century Racing's Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier in action during the Dakar Rally Prologue on Saturday.—Reuters

Police boost security for SCG Test after Bondi Beach attack

SYDNEY: Australian police said they would bolster staffing at the Sydney Cricket Ground for the fifth Ashes Test starting on Sunday, weeks after gunmen killed 15 people at a Jewish event in the city.

The father-and-son gunmen are alleged to have carried out the attack at a Hanukkah event at the famed Bondi Beach on December 14. Australia's worst mass shooting in almost three decades shocked the nation and stoked fears of rising anti-semitism in the country.

The massacre has sparked more active policing in Sydney, Australia's most populous city and the capital of New South Wales state.

Authorities on Saturday announced a "high-visibility" police presence for the marquee cricket series between Australia and England, which is held every two years. Measures at the cricket ground, some 5 km (3 miles) from Bondi Beach, would include the riot patrol unit, officers on horseback and officers carrying rifles.

The difference will be in the visibility of long arms and a stronger presence," New South Wales Police Commissioner Mal Lanyon said in a statement.

Police said they expected a capacity crowd for day one of the fixture, the final encounter in the five-match series already claimed by Australia.

"Many people may not be used to seeing police carrying rifles at sporting events, but our objective here is to help the public feel safe," Lanyon said.

Cricket Australia said first responders to the attack and "community members who bravely acted" would be honoured before the start of play on Sunday.—Reuters

Revenge not on Sabalenka's mind for Australian Open

BRISBANE: World number one Aryna Sabalenka said on Saturday she isn't out for revenge after losing her Australian Open crown in a shock loss to American Madison Keys last year.

Sabalenka went into the final at Melbourne Park aiming to become the first woman since Martina Hingis to win three consecutive Australian Open titles.

But she was undone by Keys, who won her maiden Slam in an inspired performance on Rod Laver Arena.

The Belarusian said there was no difference coming to Australia as the champion or as the runner-up.

"It doesn't matter which tournament it is," she said ahead of a warm-up in Brisbane.

"If I'm defending champion, if I lost in the first round last year, the goal is always the same — to bring my best tennis and to improve my game.

"Honestly, that's it. I always just focus on myself, on developing my game, and making sure that I'm 100 percent there."

Sabalenka had an unusual lead-in to the Australian Open starting this month, playing Nick Kyrgios in a much-criticised "Battle of the Sexes" in Dubai.

But she said she was glad to be back in Australia, where she enjoys the conditions and has had great success.

"I definitely don't like the heat, but the people, yeah," she said. "I think the atmosphere — it's always a full crowd [in Brisbane]."—AFP

'Karachi Open historic step towards reclaiming Pakistan's squash glory'

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: As Pakistan prepares to hold its biggest squash event in two decades, organisers are hoping that the Karachi Open — with a record prize purse of $243,000 — will be a historic step towards reclaiming Pakistan's lost dominance in the sport.

"We are striving to reclaim Pakistan's dominance in squash, and hosting the Karachi Open is a historic step [in this direction]," legendary player Jahangir Khan who is chairman of the Sindh Squash Association, told a news conference on Saturday.

The championship will run from Jan 6 to 11 and the organisers said that there were plans to elevate the event from Professional Squash Association 'Gold' to 'Platinum' status next year with a prize purse of US$1 million.

"The peaceful conduct of this international tournament will project a positive image of Pakistan," added Jahangir, who alongside Jansher Khan helped Pakistan dominate global squash during the better part of two decades.

"Practical steps are needed to unearth new talent," added Jahangir, the Emeritus President of the World Squash Federation.

"I remain committed to promoting squash globally and am available to serve the sport in Pakistan."

The event, which will take place at the DA Creek Club — the same venue that hosted the World U-23 Championships last year, will see participation from some of the world's top men's and women's players.

However, it was hit by some late withdrawals on Friday as men's fifth seed Youssef Soliman and women's fourth seed Salma Hany pulled out due to injury.

Soliman's withdrawal means Mohamad Zakaria, Aly Abou Eleinen and Eain Yow Ng and Fares Dessouky complete the top eight seeds, who will receive a bye in the first round.

Egypt's world number four Karim Abdel Gawad — who claimed the Karachi Open title in 2022 — is the top seed, followed by compatriot and seventh-ranked Marwan Elshorbagy.

Youseff Ibrahim is seeded third, ahead of former world number one Mohammed Elshorbagy.

Pakistan will be represented by four players: World Under-23 Champion and 38th-ranked Noor Zaman and world number 47 Mohammad Asad Irfan, while wildcard entries have been handed to former national champions Nasir Iqbal and Tayyab Aslam.

On the women's side, Hany's withdrawal has seen Nada Abbas move up to fourth seed. Egypt's world number four and world junior champion Amina Orfi is the top seed, with Malaysia's Sivasangari Subramaniam seeded second. Fayrouz Aboelkheir is seeded third while two local players Sana Bahadur and Maryam Malik, have received wild card entries.